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LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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Since 1950 Dr. Wilhelm Imhoff, a Hamburg business man and a Councillor of the City, has been organiser of the German Protestant Kirchentag. He was responsible for arranging the great Kirchentag in Hamburg in 1953. He reports below on up-to-date methods of evangelism in the city of Hamburg, which have developed out of the Kirchentag held there.

CHURCHES ALSO NEED KIRCHENTAGS

Hamburg is one of the seven cities in Germany which have had a Kirchentag. The Church of Hamburg is the first church for many years which has organised Kirchentags within the churches, on the same lines as the great national Kirchentag. In Hamburg also for the first time Kirchentag families have been formed. A form of evangelism suited to meet the needs of the congregations in the city of Hamburg has been found, through organising seminars for the study of political science.

A glance at the religious situation in Hamburg may explain why the Kirchentag, and its follow-up work, have fallen on such good ground in that city. Hamburg has been greatly influenced by the Enlightenment. The people are liberal. Although the statistics show that 80% of the population describe themselves as Protestants (Hamburg has the highest percent of 'non-believers', namely 15%), although 83% of the children from Protestant homes are baptised (and only 40% married in Protestant churches), and although the pastors are universally respected by the people, nevertheless the people as a whole do not go to church. It is a sad fact that only 2.5% of those who pay church-taxes attend church services, and less than half of the young people.

At the Kirchentag attention was drawn vividly to one of the founders of the Inner Mission, Johann Hinrich Wichern, who introduced Sunday Schools and Visiting Groups. Like Wichern a century ago, the Kirchentag endeavoured to penetrate into the circles which pay taxes to the church but have become estranged from it, and have without realising it reverted to paganism. This means regaining those who were baptised and making them realise what Christian baptism really implies. The Kirchentag also keeps in touch with people whose interest has been aroused by the Kirchentag, by arranging for them to continue the discussion with Christians who express the Christian message without being self-conscious or officious. This involves care of those who realised at the Kirchentag that a spiritual home and brotherhood are to be found within the Church, and care of prisoners-of-war who have only recently returned home.

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

DEPARTMENT ON EVANGELISM · DIVISION OF STUDIES · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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Realising that the local churches were not all equipped for this service, some courageous lay people (who had worked for years in different branches of the Protestant Associations for Men and of the Evangelical Academy) decided to meet those who, at the big public meeting of the Kirchentag, had expressed (in writing) their interest in its 'follow-up' work. 'Kirchentag families' were formed, in order to discuss the subjects raised at the Kirchentag, or other important problems. From those who had expressed interest, a certain number were chosen who had not hitherto participated in the life of their local church. Then eight 'fathers' were appointed and 'families' consisting of 8-15 persons were formed, according to the districts where they lived. Each family consists of young people, women with jobs, housewives, men, and retired people. The meetings are held in the evenings once a month, in private houses. Tea and cakes are served. The 'father' reads a short paper to start the discussion. He is free to choose either a religious or a secular subject, or to deal with both on one evening. The 'fathers' meet a week beforehand and receive instruction from a lay person in the secular subject for discussion, and from a pastor in the religious one to be discussed at their 'family evening'. During the last few months the following subjects have been discussed:

1. a) God says 'yes' to the world (theme of the Frankfurt Kirchentag).
   b) The Christian and lying.

2. a) Christian responsibility in industry and commerce.
   b) Protestant natural law?

3. a) How should we spend our leisure? (theme at Frankfurt)
   b) Are certain spheres of life independent of ethics?

4. a) Conscientious objection to military service.
   b) The Christian and war.

After over three years' constant work on the 'Kirchentag families', if one enquires whether they are a 'success', the answers vary tremendously; a great deal depends on the gifts of the leader. Some 'families' report that some of their members have returned to the local church. In other 'families' certain members have joined the seminar on political science, in order to assume political responsibilities. A 'Kirchentag family' may be described as an experimental church, which is in a position to overcome the narrow outlook of the local churches in certain spheres and to open up fresh opportunities for Christian cooperation in family, occupation and politics.

One of the tasks of the Committees of the Kirchentag in each province is to cooperate with the church associations in order to make the laity in the churches realise their responsibilities in Church and world. As members of the Church living in the world, the laity must help to spread the Church's message. Just as the Kirchentag endeavours to give guidance on political problems, so in the same way the Seminar on Political Science started in Hamburg tries to encourage church members to undertake political work.

By setting up the Seminar on Political Science, the Kirchentag filled a gap in the special activities organised by the Church in Hamburg. During the last few years the responsibility for the Seminar has been in the hands of the Evangelical Academy; this year it will be held in cooperation with the Protestant Men's Association in their new club-house. The number wishing to participate rose this year to 150; the regular attendance is

usually about 90 - almost too many for seminar work. This year six evenings will be devoted to the study of "The forces in democracy" - in connection with Eschenburg's address given at the Frankfurt Kirchentag. Protestants who are actively engaged in public life - members of the Bundestag, journalists, leaders of organisations - will give introductory papers on the political parties, trade-unions, employers' organisations, press and radio, the civil service, the legal system; this will be followed by a thorough discussion on the subject led by the pastor of the Men's Association. The purpose of these meetings is to give Protestants an opportunity to equip themselves for the decisions they have to make this year (in the elections for the Bundestag and the Landtag), and to assume their political responsibilities as Christians. Since 1953 several members of the Provincial Committee have held responsible political positions in Hamburg. It is the desire of the Provincial Committee to persuade as many members of the Protestant Church as possible to hold themselves in readiness to assume political responsibility in the parties and as honorary members of the local government committees in the City of Hamburg. We may report with gratitude that the indifference towards public affairs formerly shown by Protestants is gradually being superseded by a decisive readiness to assume political responsibility. This applies especially to the young people and to the women who cooperate in the Protestant Women's Association.

Since the Kirchentag held in Hamburg in 1953, a Protestant Press Club has been in existence, attached to the Evangelical Academy. Furthermore the group of friends who meet once a year to hear lectures by the President of the Kirchentag shows the interest of the Hamburg people (especially business people) in the work done by the Kirchentag. This interest may also be explained by the fact that the Kirchentag's contact with the world Church closely resembles the motto of the City of Hamburg - to be 'Germany's gateway to the world'. The churches in Hamburg realised the importance of the close cooperation between the Kirchentag and the campaigns which have been organised for several years by the Protestant Men's Association. Since the national Kirchentag in Hamburg, these campaigns have been re-named, and now have the character of local Kirchentags. At the national Kirchentag in 1953 it was realised that these campaigns could be pushed still further through the intensive effect of a Kirchentag. It was therefore decided to call these local campaigns 'local Kirchentags' and to model their methods on those of the national Kirchentag.

I should like to say something about the last local Kirchentag held in Hamburg; it was held in the district of Eppendorf and was the thirteenth local Kirchentag held in the city. A report on it has been written by Pastor Waldemar Wilken (pastor of the Men's Associations) who initiated the evangelism campaigns and the local Kirchentags. These local Kirchentags organised in Hamburg have the following characteristics:

1) they are held on the premises of a local church,
2) they promote cooperation between church associations,
3) they employ the same methods as the national Kirchentags:
   a) an address on a definite subject, followed by discussion,
   b) Bible study, services and Communion,
   c) the evangelistic appeal,
   d) Christian art (plays, films literary readings),
   e) missions to factories and street missions,
   f) contact with churches in the German Democratic Republic,
4) great importance is attached to visiting people in their homes,
5) the different classes are approached separately.

About ten weeks before a local Kirchentag a preparatory Committee is formed, consisting of representatives of the different church committees and church groups, the pastors and the full-time church workers. The preparations for the Kirchentag often create cooperation in real team-work between the churches and break down the divisions so typical of city churches. In this team-work an attempt is made to think out the structure of the Church and to seek fresh methods of approach. For instance, in one church a visit was paid to the civic authorities; this has now resulted in the mayor of Eppendorf inviting the representatives of the church in his district to an official reception in the town hall.

The Men's Associations, the Women's Associations and the Youth Associations all cooperate in the local Kirchentag; a lot of visiting is done and special meetings are arranged. At one of the recent Kirchentags special meetings were arranged for a fortnight for boys and girls in secondary schools, a public evening was held for young people, and the Bishop of Hamburg gave a reception for leaders of church youth-groups.

A local Kirchentag lasts four weeks altogether. The first week is devoted to arranging visits, which are then carried out during the second week after an Emittory Service attended by all those helping in the preparations and by many members of the churches and church associations all over Hamburg, i.e. about 200 "Visitors". These Visitors go out two by two; during the evenings between six and nine o'clock each couple makes about thirty visits (on five evenings). They invite people to come to the meetings to be held during the third week, and also in many cases evangelise through personal conversations. Only in one case out of seven are the Visitors received in an unfriendly manner. About one person in seven visited attends one of the meetings during the third week. The others are polite but indifferent.

During the third week, which takes the form of a "Week of Religion", evening lectures are held from the Monday to the Friday on subjects dealing with the relation of faith to life. These lectures aim at putting confidence in people and encouraging them. In order to deepen the spiritual cooperation of the congregation, public discussions are held on the Friday and Saturday afternoons. The themes are introduced by a team of ten to twelve experts and then thrown open for general discussion. They include questions concerning the church and also social and political questions. At the last local Kirchentag (held in Eppendorf) the lectures were attended by about 4,000 people and discussions by about 1,000.

The activities arranged during the third week include studies on the Bible in the Church, which are attended by an increasing number of boys and girls from the upper classes of the local schools. The professional Christian dramatic company known as "Der Vorstoss" (The Vanguard) presents plays on modern problems. The "North-West Protestant Film Society" shows new films. These are followed by discussion. The programme of the Eppendorf Kirchentag included an exhibition of "church handicrafts". Church music was also played. Every evening at ten o'clock Communion was celebrated.

The local Kirchentag includes an evangelistic appeal. The Kirchentag goes into the street. A team composed of three people, including the local pastor, addresses the public from a lorry; the centre of the audience is made up of a team sent from the local church. Handbills are put up beforehand, indicating where the meeting will be held. One variation of the street-mission is the performance of plays by "The Vanguard" company on a lorry in the open air. The play is briefly introduced by the pastor, and then a simple, direct drama is performed, followed by a public discussion in the street, finally closed by the pastor.

When visits are paid to factories, the directors and organisers are usually extremely friendly in conversation. It is not possible to address the employees in all the factories. But every factory welcomes an address from the Bishop. After the "Week of Religion" with its evangelistic appeals, a fourth week is arranged with smaller, closed meetings. Special invitations are sent to members of certain professions - doctors, teachers, lawyers, artists - and to business people and manual workers. Experts introduce subjects such as "The Responsibility of the Artist" and "Is Business detrimental to Faith?" followed by discussion. In order to give the evening a social character, tea and biscuits are served. This is an attempt to do academic work on the parish level.

Readers of this report may object that a local Kirchentag on the lines of a national Kirchentag is possible only in a city, and perhaps only within a national Church. In my view, the situation is the same in a medium-sized town with 30,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. In a town of this size a Kirchentag will help to bring the Protestant Church to the notice of the public; it will bring the churches out of their self-imposed isolation and make them think about those of their fellow-townspeople who do not go to church. It is an undoubted fact that by holding a local Kirchentag, the interest of many people who had become estranged from the Church is aroused and the church membership is strengthened. Because a local Kirchentag applies the Christian message to the actual situation, it transforms people from all walks of life - who are living on the fringe of the Church - into a Christian community with common responsibilities. It makes them realise that they have a spiritual home and true brothers in the Church of Christ.